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Towards a Multi-Focal Europe

Describing a human as a coincidentia oppositorum, rather than through a simple flat image, has a long history in philosophy. Also in our ecumenical anthology we have made an attempt to link two important areas of Christian witness that seem to us complementary, balancing the different focuses of Christian presence in the affairs of this world.

I. Serpent, Dove, Human

The image of a *serpent* can be understood as a symbol of the human eternally bound to Earth. Like Prometheus to a rock, we are tied to the Earth and thus can never become indifferent towards the environment that co-creates us.

The serpent cannot fly or jump; he is in constant contact with Earth, he feels all the changes of its temperature. For us he has become the embodiment of our social milieu that we are called to live in and co-shape.

In the image of a *dove* we see the symbol of independence, a healthy detachment from the worries, pressures and manipulations of our surroundings. The dove leaves the ground and flies up towards the sky, that ancient symbol of the seat of God. For us she has become the symbol of the freedom of the children of God.

These two symbols of parallel missions in an individual's life complement each other, and although seemingly contradictory, they lead to a more holistic understanding of the vocation of Christian witness.

We sought to capture this bi-polarity of our calling also by means

of the two seminars, whose lectures and workshops constitute the basis of this book. They were held in Trenčín, Slovakia (February 2005) on the “serpent” topic *Equal Chances or Equal Discrimination?* and in Brno, Czech Republic (July 2005) on the “dove” topic *The Myth of Independency*.

First of all, we would like to thank the main organisers of our two seminars in 2005: Lenka MATUŠKOVÁ, Irenéj FINTOR, Jordán BLAHO, Veronika HORVÁTHOVÁ, SZÖNYI László Gyula, Tanja GANTNER, Jiří SÍBRT, BARTALOŠ Tamás, Lukaš TREBULA, Aleksandra LUKSZA, Kristin NICKEL, and many others.

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In particular, we would like to thank our mother organisation, the *World Student Christian Federation Europe Region* (WSCF–E, www.wscf-europe.org), the European Regional Committee (ERC), and her regional secretary, Hanna TERVANOTKO, for their support and valuable incentives.

Finally, let us introduce the illustrator of this ecumenical anthology of ours. Marta PIWNİK is twenty years old, she comes from Poland, and currently she is a student at the Faculty of Linguistics in Warsaw University. Apart from art, she is interested mainly in foreign languages: she speaks English, German, French and Luxembourgian fluently.

She spends all her free time for artistic development. She participates at courses of the history of art, while at the same time making illustrations for (mainly Orthodox) youth organisations. Her email address is papillonblue@o2.pl.

All these people working together have been instrumental in the progress towards our broader aims—to *promote cultural diversity and tolerance*, particularly in the areas of religion, gender, nationality and ethnicity; to *develop a (Central) European consciousness* which emphasises recognition of and solidarity with

members of the greater society; and to *encourage and empower youth engagement in civil society* as a key element of responsible citizenship.

II. Committed Catalysis

1. Culture of Dialogue

Cultural diversity and tolerance is the underlying motive for all of WSCF–Europe’s activities. The World Student Christian Federation was founded as an ecumenical organisation more than a century ago, in 1895, for the specific purpose of healing the painful divisions which tear apart Christianity.

She wanted to heal it not by obliterating them, but rather by coming to a full knowledge and understanding of each member’s uniqueness and the special richness each member adds to our common body, the Church.

We look forward to the blessed day when we will achieve true *unity in diversity*. We believe that it is necessary to look outward as well as inward; that in defining our common place in the wider world, we come to understand the many similarities which bind us together, and to appreciate that we are stronger together than we are apart.

We also bear a responsibility, therefore, towards interreligious understanding and cooperation, and for the unity of humankind as a whole. We are committed to realising in society the values issuing from our faith: peace, justice and respect for human dignity, developed through a *culture of dialogue*, tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

2. (Central) European Awareness

Fundamentally the issue at stake here is *identity*—how we define ourselves and how we define the ‘Other’. Parallel with that is the issue of how others define us, and how those definitions shape our images of ourselves and influence our relationships with the others.

Correspondingly, in order to defuse tension among different groups, it is imperative that we learn how to define ourselves in ways which are as inclusive as possible; and, beyond that, how to

deconstruct the dualistic paradigms which give rise to the idea of “us/them” in the first place.

Marching towards a multi-focal Europe, we attempt these aims within the context of *European awareness*—building an identity as citizens of Europe, an identity which can be shared by all the various and sundry people with whom we come in contact in our daily lives.

This is especially critical in the region of Central Europe upon which we focus, as well as in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, marked as it is by historical tensions, former border disputes and mutual misunderstanding and mistrust.

Our goal is to facilitate *reconciliation* among nations by layering on additional dimensions—Central European and European identities—to the narrow self-definitions which unfortunately still prevail.

The time is ripe for this project in Central Europe. Identity is a sensitive issue particularly in this region of the world, where the legacy of crumbled empires is a collection of nation states haunted by a history of majority (or minority) oppression and subjugation.

With the recent entrance into the European Union (EU) of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, they find themselves once again part of a trans-national political and cultural structure.

But in order to fully integrate, it is imperative that citizens of these countries come to define themselves in terms larger than their own nationality, culture, religion or religious denomination.

3. Responsible Civil Society

Hand-in-hand with identity goes *responsibility*: as we become aware of the many different roles we play in the world, we also understand the manifold ways in which we are accountable to the other members of our communities; and in which our communities are accountable to other communities.

Towards this end, we work to promote *civil society*—young people engaging in private efforts for the public good, taking the initiative for social development through collective action.

Once again, this is an issue of vital weight and importance in the post-communist context of Central Europe, and one that we share with our neighbours also to the South and to the East.



Under communism, civil society was suppressed entirely; only official organisations were allowed to exist—those in line with the totalitarian ideology. As a result, a materialist ideology developed and the concept of personal responsibility wasted away under the authoritarian hand of the state.

Now that communism has finally fallen, the civil society is showing signs of revival, but it is still very weak. Our goal is not only to strengthen and expand this key actor in the cultural sphere in Central Europe, but also to use our experiences to encourage the process in Eastern and South Eastern Europe.

Central Europe, then, is the starting point: as our title indicates, our ultimate aim for this project is to multiply the *foci* of European culture, to reflect the full richness of the continent in all her diversity.

But it is only possible to do this one step at a time—neighbour helping neighbour. As Central Europe is restored to her rightful place within the *mozaik* of Europe, she is uniquely situated to bridge the gap between West and East, North and South, using her wisdom and experiences to further the multiplication process.

Our main goal is to educate generations of students and young people, who acknowledge this responsibility and are prepared to take up the challenge of building a common future.

4. Subregionalisation of WSCF Europe

Corresponding to these aims, our concrete *objectives* are to *deconstruct national, denominational and religious prejudices* in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe through intercultural and interdenominational dialogue; to *build supra-national identities and relationships* through cross-border cooperation both within Central Europe and with neighbours to the South and East; and to *educate new generations of committed leaders* through training and practical leadership experiences.

These goals align closely with the goals of our partner organisations, who share our basic mission and vision. By cooperating in this project, they have the opportunity to extend the national character of their work into an international dimension, bringing them into contact with other organisations working towards the same ends and facing similar challenges.

Through these cross-border *cooperations*, they can mutually enrich each other through the exchange of ideas about new topics and working methods. They also benefit from the leadership training aspect of the project, which identifies potential leaders from amongst their membership and provides appropriate developmental activities, ultimately strengthening the capacities of the organisations themselves.

Concretely, we hope to accomplish these goals by the institutionalisation of the *Central European Subregion (CESR)* within our Europe-wide organisation. This subregional structure comprises at the moment our partners in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, as well as our supporting partner in Croatia.

We would solidify the formal basis for cooperation amongst the partner organisations in this project and enable them to increase contacts and cooperation with Eastern and South Eastern Europe, hopefully providing a *catalyst* for those countries to begin in turn such cooperations of their own.

We envision the cooperation to consist of a series of *seminars*, one in each of the aforementioned countries with full

membership, dealing with topics of relevance to youth in our primary focus area, Central Europe.

Participants will come from the partner countries, as well as guests from neighbouring Eastern and South Eastern European countries (Serbia and Montenegro, Romania, Ukraine).

Two seminars take place each year, one in the winter and one in the summer. Following the second seminar each year, an *anthology* is published to follow up the themes of the seminar and spread them to a much wider and broader audience.

Other activities of ours are *language and leadership training courses* in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, our secondary focus area. These courses serve multiple purposes: for our organisation, to increase our contacts in those areas and to identify participants for our events; and for them, access to leadership training, international contacts and other capacity-building support.

Furthermore, Central European students, who show leadership potential, will be able to participate as guests in these Eastern and South Eastern Europe events, reciprocating the Eastern and South Eastern guests at Central European events, thus providing opportunities for sharing our wisdom and knowledge with each other.

III. Interconnected Innovation

1. Dialogical Methodology

Our long-term cooperation is innovative in many respects, most of all *methodologically*, in the sense that we provide fora, which foster *dialogue* among students and young intellectuals.

The concept and theory of dialogue is central to our philosophy and provides the unifying foundation, which subsumes all our work. We understand it to be an end as well as a means—the experience of engaging in dialogue has value in and of itself.

This important aspect is often overlooked when communication is regarded solely in terms of the content being transferred, ignoring the equally important issue of the mode, which the transfer takes place by.

The methodology of dialogue works by the rediscovery of humankind's original and fundamental *interconnectedness*. The

mentality of dialogue is complementarity, mutual correction and relationality: not 'superior-than' but 'in-relation-to.'

It also utilises the processes of indigenisation, inculturation and *contextualisation*. This is important, as it allows for issues to be addressed in a multidisciplinary way, rather than artificially removing them from their natural and proper relations.

True dialogue assumes that the parties engaging in it meet as equals, each bringing a uniquely valuable perspective—a crucial prerequisite for deconstructing the oppressive dualisms and hierarchical relationships, which breed prejudice, hostility and intolerance.

2. Disciples in Community

This important innovation has radical implications for our working methods as well, if understood seriously. We are committed to ensuring that all participants in our activities come together on equal footing—that we are a community of peers and mates.

Towards this end, our cooperation, like all our projects, is *wholly conceived and implemented by youth* (ages eighteen to thirty-five). Young people are involved at all levels in project activities, from simple participation through organisation and implementation to strategic oversight. In this way there is an emphasis on mutual exchange of knowledge and development in a maximally inspiring environment.

The *coordinator* of the project is a recent graduate or young professional usually from outside Central Europe (sometimes even from outside the continent), who is provided with a monthly stipend to live and work in one of the Central European cities, to date Budapest or Praha.

This adds an important dimension of intercultural exchange to the project, as the coordinator brings experiences and knowledge from her or his unique background to share; and by living in Central Europe and working with Central Europeans, she or he comes to know the realities of life in another (many times in a very different) context.

A *board* made up of youth from each of the five countries (a member and a proxy, and sometimes other guests and experts) orchestrates the long-term vision and mission of the subregional project.

The board agrees on themes and venues for the seminars, prepares applications for funding, nominates the preparatory committee, recruits participants and evaluates the success of activities.

Members also determine the strategic direction of the cooperation, for instance, which non-Central European countries to focus on cooperation with. As well, they provide oversight for the coordinator and the preparatory committees. Board members keep in regular contact with each other via email, and meet at least twice a year, usually during or in connection with the seminars.

Preparatory committees are formed for each seminar by one representative of each of the five full partner organisations, plus the project coordinator, and an additional member from the country, where the seminar is to take place, who leads the hosting committee.

The preparatory committees decide the actual content of the seminar, formulate the programme, invite lecturers, recruit participants, and take care of all the practical arrangements necessary for the hosting and travel, and for the visas if needed.

At the seminar itself, they ensure the smooth running of the programme; they meet daily during the seminar to evaluate its progress, and at the end of the seminar to evaluate it in its totality.

3. Informal Education

Young people are also responsible for the *learning*, which takes place at the seminars. We invite as lecturers postgraduate students or recent graduates, who provide the perspective of young intellectuals and professionals on topics of high contemporary relevance.

We also implement cooperative *informal education* in all our seminars, led by the participants themselves, in the form of workshops, working groups, discussion groups and moderated panel discussions.

Special care is taken always to ensure that each participant of the seminar is properly encouraged and provided with a space to share her or his knowledge and experience related to the general or specific topic.

Following each calendar year's two seminars, a team of usually three editors (all youth: the project coordinator, plus two members of different partner organisations) solicit articles related

to the themes of the seminars, and put together the annual *ecumenical anthology*.

It includes the lectures from the seminars, as well as responses to or developments of ideas presented there from participants, and articles from other non-participants interested in the same topics.

The book is published mostly in English (some exceptions can be made), usually with summaries of each article appearing in all of the official national languages of the subregion, currently in Czech, German, Magyar, Polish and Slovak.

Our *Lingua Franca language and leadership training* courses follow the same principle of mutual learning that underlies our seminars. Young people fluent in one of Europe's *Linguae Francæ* (usually English, but also French, German, Russian or Spanish) travel to Central, Eastern or South Eastern Europe to share this knowledge with their peers there.

Teachers come from Western or Central Europe or the United States of America (USA) or Canada, so this provides another valuable cultural exchange. Teaching is done on a voluntary basis; in return for her or his time, the teacher receives full hosting in the local community, along with cultural excursions and other insights into the host culture.

4. Bridge Towards East and South

The idea that *Central Europe must serve as a bridge to Eastern and South Eastern Europe* is another innovation springing from our central emphasis on dialogue and peer relationships.

In this way the people reaching out to these countries are those from contexts most similar to their own; thus minimising any condescension or unfavourable comparison, and maximising the amount of useful information and experiences which can be exchanged. It is perceived as a friendly hand being extended to neighbours, taking our responsibility for others from less favourable circumstances.

In fact, all the Central European organisations, which comprise our partners involved, have been carefully selected as well to continue this focus of building relationships between neighbours.

The very idea of Central Europe breaks down traditional divisions between East and West, North and South, many of

which are arbitrarily based on the history of the last sixty or maximum ninety years.

This has led to a unique combination of countries involved in this project: Austria (who also has experiences with Soviet occupation) is a full and equal partner with the four post-Soviet Bloc countries; and Croatia and Slovenia participate as partners as well, helping to develop their post-Yugoslav identities.

Our Croatian partner organisation constitutes a special case within the scope of our cooperation, and it helps to illustrate another of its many innovative and creative aspects.

Although ideally it would be full and equal members with the other five, at present it does not have the organisational capacity to participate fully, for instance by hosting seminars, within the current time frame of our cooperation.

Therefore they participate in a limited role, tailored to meet their needs. The other five countries appreciate the value of the Croatian contribution and are committed to helping fundamentally strengthen its position through participation in our cooperation.

IV. Ever-higher Education

Thus our firm commitment to dialogue and mutual respect also serves as the principle upon which the structure of our cooperation is based. It is *designed entirely in a 'bottom-up' manner*, with the needs of the partner organisations determining the direction of the project, rather than vice-versa.

Our philosophy of learning is one of *praxis*, or *learning by doing*. We believe that the only way young people can learn to work and make decisions in an international and intercultural context is simply to be enabled to do so, within a suitable and supportive environment.

Therefore, our programme is structured to provide these opportunities at different intensities, suitable to the various levels our participants are at and allowing space for them to develop during the course of the project. Our emphasis is on *education combined with leadership training*, which interact and mutually enrich each other.

1. Language Training

Leadership training is divided into three levels within the project, beginning with the *Lingua Franca* language and leadership training courses. The primary function of these courses is to teach young people a language with which they can communicate in an international environment, enabling them to represent their countries in international events.

The courses take place in groups mostly of a single nationality within the participants' home countries, making them a very non-threatening environment for young people's initial encounters with the project.

The international dimension of these leadership courses comes from the teachers, coming primarily from Western, Northern, Southern and Central Europe, but sometimes even from overseas.

Also other Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europeans from neighbouring countries may join the courses as participants. This dual participation structure is necessary because of the wide range of proficiencies in English among young Central Europeans.

Some of them are quite fluent and able to teach, while others have a basic knowledge, but could benefit from a short intensive course to give them sufficient self-confidence to use it in a working environment.

2. Student Seminars

From there, the next step is participation in one of our international *seminars*. This is where the information aspect of the cooperation culminates. One significant topic is explored in depth through a variety of methodologies, considering it from every angle to give a true multidisciplinary approach.

The themes are carefully chosen to cover a broad area, providing a solid background on issues of importance to future Central European leaders and youth leaders. Special care is also taken to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to share their perspectives, in particular many minority voices.

Since multiple youth from each country participate, and the countries share a broader Central European culture, again it is a non-threatening, welcoming and warm environment.

3. Preparation for Decision-Making

The third level of leadership training comes in the *preparatory committees* for the seminars. There, people, who show potential based on their active participation in previous seminars, are brought together, one from each partner country, to formulate the programme for the seminar and to realise it at the appointed time.

Including the project coordinator, youth from at least six different nationalities work together as a team, to produce a fully international event. They get hands-on experience in all the activities necessary to produce such an event. They are also responsible to evaluate its success at the end and to make recommendations on how it could be done better in the future.

4. Vision and Supervision

The fourth level is the Central European *Board*, which is a supervisory structure responsible for determining the overall *raison d'être* of the subregion, and envisioning her future direction and the strategic steps necessary for reaching it.

The participating countries, following the example of the European Union (EU), take turns every half a year in providing chairperson for the subregion, who serves as the moderator of the meeting sessions and the email discussions.

The board consists of the coordinator, plus one member from each of the five countries. Another member from each country serves as a non-voting proxy—in itself a level of leadership training in preparation to becoming a full board member.

Proxies are present at all board meetings and discussions, are free to speak and to take on responsibilities, and act in the place of voting members in the case of their absence. The board serves as a training ground, which can bear many fruits later in the adult life as well.

Outside this ladder structure, several other opportunities for leadership exist as well. Another opportunity might be teaching *Lingua Franca* courses in countries of Eastern and of South Eastern Europe, thus completing the circle of leadership training.

V. Contextual Outreach

1. Disseminating Subregions

While youth in our Eastern and South Eastern European neighbouring countries are not formally and totally included in the uppermost levels within the structure of this project, opportunities for development exist for them as well.

Most prominent among these would be the possibility of becoming a course organiser for Lingua Franca in their own countries, coordinating national courses jointly with a multinational team.

Ultimately, however, the idea is that young leaders from these countries would *employ their skills in their own contexts*, developing multinational projects of their own through the people and ideas they come in contact with, while participating in our project.

Outside the scope of our cooperation, but open to all the youth participating, is the opportunity for further leadership development at the European-wide level of the parent organisation.

Indeed, one of our goals in building and strengthening these subregions is the formation of leaders with the skills and experience, to assume responsibility at our highest level in WSCF-Europe, that of the European Regional Committee (ERC).

The ERC is a multinational group of youth which implements the policy of WSCF-Europe; several Central European youth, who have come up through our project structure have taken roles on this committee or various other European-level leadership positions. Furthermore, it is also possible that the most talented youth leaders can represent Europe in the global leadership of WSCF.

These are just some examples of how the effective and complementary partnership between the international- and national-level constituent organisations can facilitate stretching the borders of this project far beyond Central Europe.

2. Inspiring Europe

Another area in which this occurs is the multi-layered dissemination of results: WSCF-Europe's network ensures that

information about our aims and events reach at least one thousand five hundred people across the continent.

As the national partner organisations frequently comprise *local groups* (Student Christian Movements) in the major university cities of their respective countries, many of the youth active at this level are also active in local and regional groups. So in this way both the advance publicity and the resulting information find their way into their church groups, equally benefiting other segments of the general population as well.

The primary follow-up to our activities is the publication of the annual *ecumenical anthology*. At least one thousand copies are printed and distributed widely throughout Central Europe and the rest of the continent and the globe.

Members of the partner organisations all receive copies, as well as our contacts in Eastern and South Eastern Europe. Further, they are distributed at all Central European and WSCF-Europe conferences and events; and to libraries, universities, colleges, institutions, church bodies, sister organisations and senior friends. And finally, it is made available in full on our website, www.wscf-cesr.org, for anyone to view at any time.

Perhaps the best dissemination of results, though, is that done by the *participants* themselves, when they return to their own countries. The topics, which are addressed from an international perspective at the seminars, can be studied further in a national context by the partner organisations.

The participants themselves can lead the discussions in these cases, and contribute new ideas gleaned from the interaction at the seminars. In this way, participants take back not only the educational or informational aspects of the seminars, but also leadership skills, thoroughly and effectively multiplying the results.

Our method of selecting participants for the seminars is crucially important in fostering this indelible multiplicative effect. Because there are several participants from each country instead of just two or three, they are able to form relationships, while participating and working together at the seminars.

Then, as soon as they return to their respective home countries, they can properly function as a core nucleus to spread their knowledge, while mutually supporting and encouraging each other.

Also, we do not bring in an entirely new group of participants at each seminar; the presence of earlier participants moving up through the leadership ladder (as board members, preparatory committees, and so on) serves to create a healthy balance of experience and fresh perspectives.

This *balance of old and of new* also creates a solid basis for the continuation of the Central European Subregion, which we truly envision as a genuine and visionary long-term cooperation.

3. Ownership of Strategies

All of our well thought-out and constantly developing structures, among them the board and proxy systems, are set up to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, wisdom, spirituality and authority.

They also foster a sense of *ownership* and responsibility among the many youth involved. Having such a structure in place makes it possible to adapt our strategic direction as necessary to make sure that it meets the changing needs of the partners and youth involved.

For example, we allow the increased participation of Croatia into the cooperation as its organisational capacities develop. For Eastern and South Eastern European participants especially we hope to achieve a multiplicative effect in the home countries.

Our hope and vision is that through leadership formation activities and exposure to the subregional structure of international meetings as it exists in Central Europe, they will gain the skills, enthusiasm and knowledge to adapt this structure to meet the needs of their own respective contexts.

Our long-term goal is to see them establish national Student Christian Movements (SCMs), similar to our partner organisations in Central Europe, and ultimately to form the foundation for the Eastern and for the South Eastern European subregions, for the benefit of all of us in Europe.

4. Long-term Investment in Spirit and Genius

We definitely and committedly anticipate a long-term multiplicative effect far beyond the scope of our cooperation. The *spirit and genius* of international cooperation created at these events can long outlive the cooperation itself.

It is important to mention that the first incarnation of today's Central European cooperation existed in the interwar years (1921–1939) in the form of conferences of Polish, Czech, Slovak, Magyar, Romanian, Yugoslav and Austrian students, devoted to developing future leaders.

Furthermore, education (be it in a formal or in a non-formal way) is by its very nature a long-term investment, many times passing through generations. Knowledge, wisdom and erudition have no expiration date.

As our participants grow and learn together within the informal environment of our seminars and of our other activities, they are acquiring skills and knowledge, which will serve them well at all times and in all areas of their lives.

The *interdisciplinary* approach to themes encourages the *synthesis* of information, drawing together understanding and expertise from many walks of life to fashion a true education in the humanities: the awareness of human thought and relations, in which subsists our very conception of who we truly are.

To this theoretical dimension we add the practical dimension of learning by doing, not just from lecturers and leaders, but also from each other, as we come together to learn and work across boundaries of nation, gender, ethnicity and religion.

It is a potent combination. They are two dimensions of education—theoretical and practical—humanistically focused, and carried out within an environment of dialogue, cooperation and mutual respect.

From these, something truly revolutionary can spring: an understanding of ourselves first and foremost as human beings, inextricably identified with each other and with the world we create.

